

Students of Small Things

Embracing a call to faith without force

A sermon by The Rev. Drew Downs

October 2, 2016
Proper 22C | Luke 17:5-10

We like things big in the U.S.

When I was going to school in Canada, I'd show up with a 44 oz drink from Speedway and my friends and professors would shake their heads. One called it "Texas-sized" which is pretty true.

We're obsessed with big. Which is why we have trouble with Jesus always going small.

This sense of confusion was how I felt watching the 2003 remake of *The Italian Job*: a great heist movie with some epic car chases.

But unlike the muscle cars of *Bullitt*, they didn't use Mustangs or Chargers. They used Mini Coopers. Not just small cars, tiny ones. Not cars built for power. Nor top speed. Something else. Agility. Fit into tight spaces.

The image of tough guys using tiny cars is still kinda revolutionary in our super-sized culture.

A culture in which the rise of the SUV more than doubled pedestrian fatalities in the 2000s because front impact rose from the legs to the chest. It wasn't that more people were hit. It's that those who were were more likely to die from it.

Bigger isn't always better. And Jesus's teaching, especially in Luke, plays off of our size bias.

The Mustard Seed

This is our prime example. The tiniest speck. Turns out that even the smallest faith can be enough.

The tiniest pebble in your shoe. A bit of sand in your teeth or a popcorn skin between them. Yeast, seeds. Even David against Goliath.

Small things: big, big impact.

This is the substance of the revolutionary idea woven throughout Jesus's teachings. That the world values big. A big GOD who can beat up other gods. The mighty nation with the giant army. Huge towers, scraping the sky. Big ministries filling big churches with big people rocking to big music, praising our big GOD.

Just like Rome, we aim to impress. Go big or go home.

But it isn't a big faith that throws the mulberry tree into the sea. It's the small faith. Not super-sized: micro-sized.

Small Faith in a Big Culture

For the last several chapters in the gospel we call Luke, Jesus has been talking about how hard this Jesus thing is. Because we live in the midst of a world oriented in the opposite direction. How hard it is to love the unlovable and to bring in the one cast out. To love the one who has rejected you and show mercy when they seek forgiveness.

Then in chapter 16, the last two weeks, Jesus has cast an image of what the world looks like. A vision like our world, not the kindom. And what it takes to use the power of the world against itself, like a spiritual jujitsu.

Images which show how the kindom is peeking through into the world as we know it. Like a mustard seed in the midst of redwoods.

The evangelist has peppered these ideas throughout. Including the least of these being greater than John the Baptist. Or putting the child in the midst of them saying

"Whoever welcomes this child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me; for the least among all of you is the greatest"

The smallest being the greatest isn't just a rhetorical device. It's the way of the kingdom. And perhaps it's so because it's at odds with the way of the world.

And yet,

These Sayings Are Weird.

Three sayings:

1. About being thrown into the sea with a millstone to weigh you down.
2. Tossing a mulberry tree into the sea.
3. Having dinner with slaves.

All different and seemingly unconnected. Not even this small/big dynamic makes sense of them. So what gives?

Again, our focus is on the kingdom peeking through.

Stumbling

The little ones. The micro-sized. For Luke, the people he's talking about at the beginning of this chapter are people literally closer to the ground. Children. Small people, like Zacheaus, who we'll meet later. The people bent over in the fields. The ones cast out into the gutters. The people closest to the dirt.

This is the reminder we get every year on Ash Wednesday, that it's all about the dirt. How the first human, Adam was named for the dirt, came from the dirt and was given the job to till the dirt.

And we, like the first human, come from that same dirt and we remind each other: "Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return."

So to be a stumbling block to such a one, the holiest, the one who's reaching toward holiness in the soil, rather than in the sky, is to cause grave sin.

Better to be cast into the water and removed than be there to prevent the kingdom from breaking through.

The Mulberry Tree

We wouldn't know this, but the mulberry tree was seen as an imposter. It supposedly was thought to look like a fig tree, only it doesn't bear fruit. So this image of casting with our micro-faith, the mulberry tree is to remove the stumbling block, the one not bearing fruit of the Spirit.

The Dinner with Slaves

The third example might be confusing in the abstract, as we've been told to welcome people to the table. The prostitute, the man with dropsy, the tax collectors and sinners. All these fresh in our minds.

But Jesus is letting the kingdom peek through into our world, where slaves and division is present. And he assumes we won't do what he says.

This, then is the turn at the end. After we've had dinner. When we've done what our culture has encouraged us to do, to treat our slaves as slaves. Rather than as brothers and sisters. So then the kingdom comes! And we have to answer for what we've done. And we say *We just did what we thought we were supposed to do.*

Isn't this the argument the Pharisees use about Torah? About the Law, about the Sabbath? *We're doing what we were taught was best!*

What we hear in every generation when we discover our transgressions and mistakes. *That's what we were taught!*

All these are obstacles for the kingdom, not descriptions of it. It's peeking through--a tiny pinhole--light barely visible. Truth revealed in the midst of pain.

Students of Small Things

Jesus is still speaking to his disciples here, to his closest followers. The ones he has challenged to see past our world into these thin spaces where the kingdom is somehow visible. And he invites them to not only be his students who observe him, but observe what he sees in the world.

He invites them to become students of small things.

Not because big is bad and small is good. But because big is overvalued and small is rejected. And today, not much has changed.

We value those of us who can reach the top shelf and think we're reaching up to GOD. And for our more diminutive members, we say, at least they aren't left-handed, right? At least we said that until a few decades ago.

But for Jesus these connections are so important. We can learn compassion from our children and generosity from our homeless. And this is still so revolutionary an idea, that we share videos on Facebook proving it's possible.

Jesus tells us not to look up to the heavens for GOD, for a kingdom coming in glory. One which will save us all from the challenges of this life and maybe erase our student or medical debt that we can't ever seem to pay off.

Don't look up for kingdom. Look down. Look at the dirt. At the people who work it. Or play in it. Or sleep in it. That's where we'll find the kingdom.

And when we find it there, how much more rewarding it is to roll in it. Much better than Scrooge McDuck's Money Bin. Dirt is more forgiving than gold and silver and far more than those who love such things.